

Reading Fiction in Antebellum America: Informed Response and Reception Histories, 1820-1865

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Review

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Machor, James L. *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America: Informed Response and Reception Histories, 1820-1865*. Johns Hopkins University Press, \$75.00
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A literary look at Civil War-Era Society

James L Machor sets himself an impressive task: to read contemporary reviews of famous and forgotten authors as the gatekeepers and muses of antebellum literary culture. Machor applies what he calls "historical hermeneutics," which traces the discursive and dialectical relationship between author, critic, and audience. Accordingly, a reading of the ways in which critics and authors shaped each other's sensibilities exposes the extent to which anachronistic modernism still affects today's scholars. Machor's hermeneutics yields impressive results.

After describing the fast-paced growth of print culture, Machor establishes the role of popular literary critics in the midst of an expanding and complex print culture. Reviewers imagined themselves as public servants and pedagogues in a literary environment, that to readers, was both exciting and anxiety inducing. Reviewers, then, writing in popular and influential journals like *Godey's Lady's Book* and the *North American Review*, wielded the authority to establish the "interpretative strategies" by which readers could judge quality from trash (39). According to Machor, antebellum reviewers conceived of symbolism as an allegorical device or emblematic of broad, ethical issues. Undue complexity, especially verbose and abstract works that read like "philosophical treatises" or conclusions where villains did not receive their comeuppance, proved problematic. Likewise, reviewers saw themselves in pedagogical terms and understood as part of their role the teaching of readers how to themselves be critical readers and able to navigate the ethical contours of a book and judge its moral integrity. More importantly, reviewers weighed the verisimilitude of a work because its seeming truthfulness proved the vehicle by which novels

worked their influence on readers. For Machor, authors, both seminal and secondary, are only comprehensible to the modern critic when he situates authorship in a discursive relationship between readers and reviewers.

Since antebellum audiences and reviewers read authorial voice as the reflection of an author's psyche, Poe, for example, was perceived as a tortured soul whose fiction reflected his unstable mind, an impression of Poe still common today. "The Raven," for example, led to charges that Poe was "under the influence of opium" and that the poem itself was a dialogue between "Mr. Poe" and the raven (135). Likewise, while Melville is still popularly perceived as a "tragically heroic" author who was alienated from an audience who misunderstood the ever-growing complexity of his tales, Machor argues convincingly that even though Melville's contemporaries judged later works like *Moby Dick* as departures from the quality of his first and most popular book, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, Melville actively sought to cater to his reader's tastes in books like *Mardi*, which "was to be as many things to as many readers as possible" (142, 155). Significantly, Machor demonstrates that *Moby Dick*, while not as popular as Melville hoped, was "hardly condemned as a failure" (181). Only after his rediscovery by critics in the 20th century, did Melville become the great and ahead-of-his-times novelist of the 19th century (200). Other examples abound. Catherine Sedgwick's book, *Hope Leslie*, was perceived in the late 20th century as a work that challenged nineteenth-century class, gender, and racial structures when it was, in fact, not perceived as radical by her contemporaries, but instead as a "national novel grounded...in...its use of America's past," displaying, as one critic noted, "one of the best proofs...that American writers may find in our own national characteristics and history...excellent themes for American writers" (221-222). The largely forgotten Caroline Chesebro' is understood by her few modern critics as a flawed writer whose contemporary reviewers panned her work when, in fact, a careful reading of Chesebro's reviews exposes a more complex reaction, where some critics found Chesebro's writing "masculine" and lacking "proportion" and others celebrated her "richly poetical fancy" and "graceful style" (262-263). It was this complicated response that led to her relative obscurity since it became impossible to label Chesebro' by contemporary standards. To properly understand Chesebro's relative obscurity according to Machor, we must "turn to the history of her reception..." to discern (296).

Drawing upon the work of audience studies, scholars, new historicists, and cultural critics like David Reynolds and Hans Robert Jauss, Machor has written a

book that will be welcomed by historians and critics of print culture alike, most importantly for the model it provides for analyzing critical responses to nineteenth-century authors. But Machor's study of critical response begs the question: How can we know reader responses to the critics? While Machor makes many logical inferences in this regard, his compelling model for reading contemporary critical responses would seem to benefit from some further hermeneutics of the readers for whom 19th century critics wrote.

Jason Stacy is the author of Walt Whitman's Multitudes: Labor Reform and Persona in Whitman's Journalism and the First Leaves of Grass, 1840-1855 (2008) and the editor of Leaves of Grass, 1860: The 150th Anniversary Facsimile Edition (2009).